

RECONSTRUCTIONS OF SACRAL HISTORY: MNEMONIC STRATEGIES IN LITHUANIAN RELIGIOUS THEATRE

Key words: sacral theatre, sacral history, theatre in monasteries, mnemonic strategies, memory metaphors, memory palace, identity.

The history of the search for God is inseparable from theatrical representations.

One of the most impressive pages of the theatrical collaboration of the Church and the secular in Lithuania is the baroque Jesuit theatre. In Lithuania, religious theatre was created by monks of different congregations; however, the conception of *Theatrum Mundi* was embodied in practice by Jesuit order. The baroque *Theatrum Mundi* revealed the world as a dramatic zone of light and darkness where man, directed by God, gets rid of primordial sin. The world of *Theatrum Mundi* required heroes, and the spirituality hardened in post-reformation conflict raised them; in baroque dramas, the heathen, warriors, antique heroes, inhabitants of Europe's peripheries, saints and martyrs were choosing the Kingdom of Heaven, and the trumpets of the Judgement Day were inspiring them.

Are these steps of religious theatre not reminiscent of stages of spiritual experience? Are theatrical manifestations to be related with meditation on God, which approaches us to His bright face? Perhaps the theatrical meditation of *Theatrum Mundi* may be perceived as spiritual practice during which aesthetic reality opens to us with beauty of an invisible world and opens a person for the contemplation of divine reality?

Another example of religious theatre uncloses when one touches the experience of sacral theatre of the second half of the twentieth century. Underground

convents of the Soviet period Lithuania and Kaunas Interdiocesan Priest Seminary, which was controlled by the Soviet authorities, housed theatrical performances – a modest form of which, of course, did not measure up to the baroque Jesuit theatre; however, theatrical or theatricalised meditations on spiritual experience continued the practice of the perfection of the inner world of modern time *homo religioso*.

At the end of the twentieth century, the stage of the theatre of the Restored Independent Lithuania faced new challenges to freedom. Repressed during Soviet times, the memory of the religious theatre was rehabilitated in the theatre of religious communities and on the stage of professionals.

By surveying strategies of reconstruction and recollection, the present article introduces several examples of sacral theatre: the theatrical initiatives of Lithuanian Catholic communities in the course of creation of sacral performances in the underground theatre during the period of Soviet occupation and theatrical representations in the Kaunas Interdiocesan Priest Seminary and the post-Soviet Lithuanian Drama theatre. The aim of this presentation is to analyze mnemonic strategies in the Soviet-era Lithuanian underground religious theatre and post-Soviet-era religious performances at sacral locations. Comparisons are drawn between the mnemonic strategies of repetition and recollection.

In the present article, the reconstruction of the Soviet and post-Soviet sacral theatre is carried out

on the basis of broad contexts of theory and practice of religious theatre, which are presented while introducing impressive pages of the history of the sacral theatre in Lithuania. Interviews with the creators of performances, their participants and audiences supplement the sparse primary resources of the underground sacral theatre. The strategy of repetition and recollection is related with the experience of baroque Jesuit theatre. The tradition of continuity in the religious theatre is analysed building on the book *Art of Memory* by Frances A. Yates, whereas the concept of memory palace, which explains the strategies and intentions of the creation of sacral theatre, has been created after having gotten acquainted with the Jesuit Matteo Ricci's idea of memory palace.¹

THEATRUM MUNDI AS PALACE OF MEMORY

Theatrum Mundi repetition and recollection strategies were born from the theory and practice of the sacral play in Jesuit baroque theatre; they have revealed the essential *mise-en-scène* of sacral theatre – the sphere of the sacral and secular is the human who comprehends him/herself to be in the sight of God. The features of Jesuit drama and peculiarity of acting in Jesuit theatre are presented and discussed in the works researching the poetics of theatre and literature by authors like Motiejus Kazimieras Sarbievijus, Jacob Pontanus and Francis Lang.²

Sacral performances, with reference to these above-mentioned theoreticians, had to motivate the college pupil to nurture their spirit by transforming their life into a striving for redemption and a devotional voyage to the kingdom of God and Jesus Christ.

The source of the spiritual training method is the book *Spiritual Exercises* by St. Ignatius of Loyola. In this book, published in 1583, not only the spiritual style and method appears. It also highlights the self-atoning man.³

The acting method applied to the baroque Jesuit theatre was based on the recollection strategy there, so the creation of the characters recalled a man rebuilding his soul during spiritual practice.

Only having cognized the manner of emoting in a performance of the actor of Jesuit theatre, as well as

his strategies of performance, can we reconstruct the lost world of Jesuit baroque theatre and also touch the peculiarity of this theatre, which was intended for the cultivation of a person who lives for God's greater honour.

Are the rules of *Spiritual Exercises*, which were meant for recognition of spirits, not the rules for the ministry of a *Theatrum Mundi* participant? How would he succeed in participating in a dramatic and perfectly personified fight of good and evil, which pervaded the tempestuous world of baroque drama, if, in the course of learning, there had not been such practice of recognition of the spirits that act within a human being?

Certainly, the text of *Spiritual Exercises* is not immediately intended for an actor. However, the concept of contemplative act, which penetrates the whole text of *Exercises*, explains contradictions observed by Prof. V. Zaborskaitė between epitomizing acting, which makes an interior act an exterior one, because “[...] there is a lack of the material individualizing a drama character”, and the necessity to recognize characters as well as “Gods and allegorizing figures”.⁴

May it be that the participant of a theatricalised holy procession, dressed in costumes of personages of the Old and New Testaments, symbolizes the universality of *Theatrum Mundi*, although by doing this he is not an acting statish, but a manifestation of divine love?

In the text of *Exercises*, St. Ignatius frequently refers to the requirement of repetition. The latter will be applied to the whole educative Jesuit activity. It is not just experience that is being acquired through repetition. Through repetition one hardens one's soul, since there one tries out the discovered insight. Through repetition one also sharpens one's memory, volition and mind.

Let us now open the pages of the procession playbill of the God's Body feast chronicled in 1624 by the “Jesuit academicians”.⁵

There we can find the strategy of restoring the “six fold shrine of God and His people”. In that shrine, the visible material world gets enriched by the invisible realm: timeless and limitless (eternal and

boundless) Universal World is created – stage design for *Theatrum Mundi*.

The goal of the reconstruction of the shrine of God and man is to recreate universal, with regard to time and place, decorations of *Theatrum Mundi* – the holy place of the meeting with supernatural reality. At the recreated place, personages of the Old and New Testaments, aided by numerous allegorical figures, are engaged in action. The shrine is being created in the six parts of the processional act.

The first part of the processional programme exposes *The God's Throne* in the Sun or the earthly world.

In the course of the next part, actors and spectators learned the rules of spiritual journey and discovered the Spirit of the Ark of the Covenant.

The third part of the processional act presents the meditation of the revelation to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the meditation of God's love.

The fourth part of the procession accentuates Christ. The meditation of His sacrifice moves the participant of the processional act to *The God's Throne*. Through the Holy sacrament, in the form of bread and wine, Christ, the Saviour of the world, dwelling in a church in the sacramental form, changes the human reality into a divine one.

The fifth part of the programme is devoted to God's Love, which craves human wisdom.

In the sixth part, the participants of the procession, followed by saints, martyrs and Jesuit brothers, find their way to the New Jerusalem, "which has come down out of Heaven from God" and which was revealed to St. John in his prophetic visions. Consoled and calmed, the participants of the procession leave *Theatrum Sacrum*. The mnemonic processes are finished; the playwrights, directors, and actors of Jesuit theatre unfold the world full of God's presence.

In what way can the creation of these images of the supernatural world be explained? While searching for an answer to this question, let us refer to the English poet and philosopher Frances Yates: "[...] the object of our research is not familiar to most readers. Few know that Greeks, who are creators of

the most part of arts, also created the art of memory, which was transferred to Romans and thus became a tradition of Europe. This art of memory is grounded on the technique of eternalizing of places (*loci*) and images. Most frequently this technique was qualified as a "mnemotechnique".⁶

Images which repeat the symbols and metaphors of God's throne turn the world of *Theatrum Mundi* into the *Palace of Memory*.

THE UNDERGROUND MEMORY THEATRE

Let us open the page of the Soviet-era religious theatre. Let us create an overview the theatrical activities which took place in Lithuanian underground convents and the Kaunas Interdiocesan Seminary at that time.

The Lithuanian Catholic community had been spurred into spiritual resistance by the restrictions which the Soviet occupation government had imposed upon the Seminary – the admissions quota, the KGB-controlled selection of seminarians and teachers, the constant reduction of the number of students, and the ban on catechization and open proselytizing to the laity by the clergy, seminarians and monks.

Extant scripts from those years look very much like *samizdat* publications – typewritten texts on thin paper, which were often anonymous. It was dangerous to declare their authorship, and likewise, to photograph their performers.

The titles were *The Flight into Egypt*, *The Prodigal Son*, *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, etc., and the plays were Biblical events related in verse.⁷

One can only imagine in what an unusual way evangelic place names, events and images read in the Soviet space. In order to repeat them in a secular environment, under the conditions of repressed religious memory, one required not just one's courage, but also a deep faith. The meaning of efforts of this repetition is explained by Frances Yates in his book *The Art of Memory*: "The well-known role of repetition in the common process of memorization of course plays a role in the more complex techniques of the art of memory. The earliest of the references

to the art of memory, the *Dialexis*, mentioned above, makes this clear, repeat again what you hear; for by often hearing and saying the same things, what you have learned comes complete into your memory.”⁸ Underground performances repeated the experience of *Theatrum Mundi*; the world was being revived by reminding it of supernatural reality.

Sacral performances at Lithuanian Soviet-era clandestine monasteries mostly featured evangelical plots.

Religious festivals were held behind shaded windows in secret quarters of underground convents, and lookouts were set up on nearby streets during religious performances to shield them from KGB prosecutors. Therefore, not only outlying places, but also those especially secret ones were chosen for performances.

The Small Sisters of Providence Congregation did some creative and courageous work. In Velžis, they staged puppet shows, used elements of pantomime in their acting, performed in unexpected scenic spaces, e.g., under the vaults of a church basement or in a convent courtyard.

Their production *To Carmel* was performed outdoors, where Mount Carmel would become a hill-ock in a Lithuanian landscape. In their enactment of *Faith, Hope, Love*, these notions were personified, and their content was meditated upon by means of scenic action.⁹

In the seventies, in Kybartai, Onutė Šarakauskaitė and Bernadeta Mališkaitė of the Sisters of the Eucharist Jesus Congregation got some encouragement from Reverend Sigitas Tamkevičius and carried out their work among the Church youth without paying any heed to prohibitions.¹⁰

Their productions, initially performed in a church chapel and a convent garden, reached the Kybartai House of Culture in 1987 and the hall of the Kaunas Jesuit High School in 1992.

From 1990 to 1992, the following productions were performed in the chapel of Kybartai Church: *Irka's Tragedy* by Šatrijos Ragana, *The Underwood* by Kazys Binkis, *Birutė* by Maironis, *The Mushroom War* by Justinas Marcinkevičius, *The Ruler* by Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, *The Happy Prince* by

Oscar Wilde, and a few poetic performances on the love for Motherland.¹¹

The homeland in these performances would become a holy place where from the earliest times one has lived and dreamt, loved and suffered. In the holy place of homeland, the eternal human being was being created, the one who would be capable of uniting past and future. As a result, in theatrical representations of the homeland as a holy place, time would turn into ritual or the sacral.

The Small Sisters of Providence Congregation in Kaunas and Vilnius staged Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, while sister Birutė Širvinskaitė (OSB) mentions Thornton Wilder's *The Long Christmas Dinner*, and sister Virginija (OSF) wrote and staged her original composition based on Antanas Maceina's *The Sun Song*.¹²

During the Lithuanian Soviet-era, paratheatrical spectacles predominated at the Kaunas Interdiocesan Seminary. In a closed circle, anniversaries of the canonization of St. Casimir, St. Francis, St. Thomas, and St. Cecilia were modestly commemorated, and the festivals of the Solemnity of Christ the King and the Immaculate Conception of Holy Virgin Mary were celebrated.¹³

An exceptional event in terms of attempts at sacral theatre was the 1984 commemoration of St. Casimir's at the Interdiocesan Seminary, in the course of which a literary composition was performed and a historic page of Lithuania's life was brought back to its cultural memory.

The procession of St. Casimir's canonisation, which had taken place 10 May 1604, in Vilnius, and during which “the purple vestment and the linen cloth had rejoiced together”, was re-enacted in the occupied twentieth-century Lithuania – complete with canon Grigalius Sventickas bringing from Rome the gift from Pope Clement VIII – St. Casimir's flag – and presenting it to the Grand Chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Leonas Sapiega.¹⁴

When deacons in dalmatics carry the flag into the Seminary Hall, a chorus of seminarians recites and re-enacts the historical procession as it is greeted at the Gates of Dawn, at St. Stephen's Church, and

at the Vilnius University with symbols of virtues (Prudence, Restraint, Fortitude, etc.) and scholarship (Theology, Philosophy, Philology).

The action culminates in a prayer addressed to St. Casimir in which “history meets the present and the Seminary’s here-and-now”.¹⁵

The participants of paratheatrical acts (such as religious performances, *tableaux vivants*, etc., staged by the initiative of various church institutions) never attempted to create professional theatrical images and characters. The performers – church youth, nuns and other parishioners rather strived to cultivate the inner experience of active and live *homo religioso*. Again and again, while performing old religious stories “that had been polished by thousands lips”, they became participants of small recollections which directed them toward Divine reality.

Participants of performances make mention of a communal spirit of performances. Young people were learning to recognize Christ in surrounding people, their environment and peripeteias of history. In the most modest manifestations of sacral theatre, actors in amateur theatre productions, overcoming prohibitions and the sparseness of the means of theatrical expression, as well as their timidity and imperfection, resembled the sacrifice and the one who sacrifices, for the sacral theatre of the Soviet period induced and prepared man for the meeting with the neglected Christ. Organizers of sacral performances during Soviet times not only evangelized to the young, but also brought participants of sacral theatre back to *Theatrum Mundi*, where recollections of the repressed memory were celebrated.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF *THEATRUM MUNDI* IN THE POST-SOVIET THEATRE

In the contemporary Lithuanian theatre the world of *Theatrum Mundi* is reconstructed in a number of performances.

The world consecrated to God (*Theatrum Mundi*) is being re-created in allegorical scenes of pilgrims in Šiluva, theatrical representations of the participants of the Eucharistic Congress in Kaunas, performances based on Biblical events and plots created by laymen in various parishes, St. Matthew school

theatre in Kaunas’ *Tales of the Millennium* (directed by Tomas Erbrėderis) as well as staged stories of vocations at the houses of monks.

Let us choose several stagings where a holy place is cited or performances choose premises which, according to Yeats, will be capable of accommodating recollections and, by means of the mnemotechnique and through repetition of the place and images, becoming the Palace of Memory.

The reconstruction of *Theatrum Mundi* in the contemporary Lithuanian professional theatre is based on the metaphor of the flight to God’s dwelling.

The flight to a sacral locus within the space of theatrical performance is the predominant sacral motif in the following productions: *The Fire-Proof City* (directed by Kęstutis Jakštas), *Idiot’s Mass* (directed by Rolandas Atkočiūnas), and *Crime and Punishment* (directed by Gintaras Varnas). In the course of researching the epistemological aspect of the process of sacralisation of theatrical space and interpreting symbols of its sacral locus, it is possible to discern a metatheatrical tendency – soul-training strategies.

Representation of the sacred locus within the space of theatrical performances is a predominant sacral motif in represented productions. A sacred locus is identified here with a temple in which performance is enacted, or with its images conjured of the space of enactment inside of a theatre building.

In the course of researching the epistemological aspect of the process of sacralisation of theatrical space and interpreting its temple symbols, it is possible to discern a metatheatrical tendency. Here performance serves as an occasion for a discourse on phenomena of soul, an invitation to a dialogue between God and human.

The performance by the director Algimantas Armonas *The Massacre of Kražiai* narrates an impressive historical drama of the confession of faith: on 24 December 1892, the Tsar’s authorities closed the Benedictine convent. They also meant to close Kražiai Church of the Immaculate Conception of St. Virgin Mary and to destroy the cemetery. The congregation requested the governor-general

to make it into the parish church (instead of the wooden St. Michael Church; they also requested to allow them to transform the latter into a cemetery chapel). On 22 June 1893, Tsar Alexander III, disregarded the requests and ordered the demolition of both the church and convent. The people prevented the closure of the church and watched it constantly. In November, in the churchyard, the massacre of Kražiai happened; the deaths of believers, injuries, imprisonment and exile marked this tragedy of the confession of faith.

On the stage of the theatre, the image of an altar is chosen as a symbol of faith. The altar by Kražiai inhabitants is identified not only with a real but also with a spiritual home. An act which symbolizes the destruction of this home is imaged as the trampling of the Holy sacrament, which is beaming in the altar's glory, by tsarist Cossacks. The whole performance is accompanied by songs of mourning for the dead, which are sung in an archaic manner. This spectacle could be called the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. Upon such an unexpected juxtaposition of an evangelical and historical event, Kražiai turns into a sacred place.

The performance *Tales of the Millennium* by theatre amateurs – the theatre of the community of Kaunas School of St. Matthew – was also performed in the proximity of the altar. The performance was held in the Kaunas Jesuit Church of St. Xavier. An original scenario recreates images of the New Testament; biblical events are retold in a visual and metaphoric theatre language by choosing for their representation metaphors of memory from the history of sacral theatre. The star of Bethlehem is glistening like an oil lamp in a homestead of an archaic Lithuanian village; child murderers, sent by Herod, like antique colossuses step firmly onto the floor of the church demonstrating their force; the Virgin Mary leans towards the baby; Christ's pupils are already ambling around in waiting for their teacher; the cloth is being laid for the Last Supper; and again and again the cross of Golgotha is hammered.

In the performance, one is suggested to meditate on the phenomenon of the recurrence of sacral history. Sacral history is metaphorized here by comparing it

with the shroud of Turin. The action of the performance enables one to compare in the imagination time and space and to turn them into the present day. In the hands of actors, the shroud from the manger of the Bethlehem stable in the performance will turn into the tablecloth of the Last Supper and the cross of Golgotha and Christ's ceremonies and the wings of the angels proclaiming the Resurrection. The director Tomas Erbrėderis, together with a group of actors, has invited his audience to reconsider the meaning of the theatrical recurrences of sacral history. By retelling sacral events and returning them again and again into new places of memory, we become creators of history as art of memory as it was then – at the dawn of Catholic theatre – and as it is now – in histories of a new millennium, in which we recognize *Theatrum Mundi*.

CONCLUSIONS

The reconstruction of *Theatrum Mundi* in Lithuanian theatre is based on the mnemonic strategy of the spiritual flight to God's dwelling.

The manifestations of the mnemonic strategy in theatre theory and theatre productions are emphasized as the leading aspect characteristic of the search for religious identity.

A meta-theatrical representation based on metaphors of memory is created in the re-enacted, remembered and repeated world of *Theatrum Mundi*.

In the course of the present analysis the sacral theatre is treated as a *theatre of memory*, the mnemonic strategies of which represent the transformation of repetition into recollection.

Sacral history, re-enacted as a Memory Palace, is considered to be the main narrative of the sacral theatre in terms of reconstruction of sacred images, symbols and concepts.

Notes

¹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, New York: Viking Penguin, 1984.

² Laszlo Polgar, *Bibliographie sur l'histoire de la compagnie de Jesus (Bibliography for History of The Society of Jesus)*, Rome: Institutum Historicum S. J., 1983, pp. 396-399.

³ Ignacas Lojola, *Autobiografija. Dvasinės pratybos (Autobiography. Spiritual Exercises)*, Vilnius: Aidai, 1998, pp. 95-107.

⁴ Vanda Zaborskaitė, *Prie Lietuvos teatro ištakų (At the Lithuanian Theatre Sources)*, Vilnius: Mokslas, 1981, p. 166.

⁵ Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa (ed.), *Dramat staropolski od początków do powstania sceny narodowej. Bibliografia. Programy drukiem wydane do r. 1765 (Old Polish Drama from the Beginning to National Theatre. Bibliography. Playbills in Print until 1765)*, Vol. 2, Wrocław: Polska Akademia Nauk, 1976, p. 29.

⁶ Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London: Pimlico, 2001, p. 26.

⁷ Handwritten texts of plays are stored in the archives of Franciscan Sisters of the Divine Heart of Jesus, the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blest Virgin Mary of the Poor, the Smaller Sisters God's Providence, the Congregation of the Sisters of the Eucharist Jesus, the Sisters

of Holy family monasteries.

⁸ Frances A. Yates, 2001, p. 142.

⁹ The Smaller Sister's God's Providence responses to the questionnaire form "The Monastic Theatrical Activity in Soviet Lithuania". The form compiled by Vitalija Truskauskaitė, 15 March 1998, Kaunas.

¹⁰ The Sister's of the Eucharist Jesus responses to the questionnaire form "The Monastic Theatrical Activity in Soviet Lithuania". The form compiled by Vitalija Truskauskaitė, 15 March 1998, Kaunas.

¹¹ Author's interview with an actor Arūnas Žemaitaitis, 15 May 2005, Kaunas.

¹² The Small Sisters of Providence responses to the questionnaire form "The Monastic Theatrical Activity in Soviet Lithuania". The form compiled by Vitalija Truskauskaitė, 15 March 1998, Kaunas.

¹³ Author's interview with a priest Gintaras Vitkus, 5 February 1998, Kaunas.

¹⁴ Author's interview with a priest Vytautas Sidaras, 16 January 1998, Kaunas.

¹⁵ The sound recording of St. Casimir's celebration is stored in personal archive of priest Algimantas Vincas Kajackas.

Vitalija TRUSKAUSKAITĖ

Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Kaunas

Sakralinės istorijos rekonstrukcijos: mnemoninės strategijos Lietuvos religiniame teatre

Reikšminiai žodžiai: sakralinis teatras, sakralinė istorija, teatras vienuolijose, bendruomenių teatras, atminties metaforos, atminties rūmai, skrydžio metaforos, tapatybė.

Santrauka

Straipsnyje pristatomas atminties teatro fenomenas: religinis teatras interpretuojamas kaip *atminties rūmai*, kuriuose atkuriami ir pakartojami sakraliniai vaizdiniai ir siužetai, kuriamos jų teatrinio įprasminimo strategijos, atnaujinama ir atgaivinama šiuolaikinio žmogaus krikščioniška tapatybė.

Religinio teatro fenomenas pristatomas su plačiu teoriniu kontekstu. Lyginant jėzuitų baroko teatre susiformavusią *theatrum mundi* koncepciją su Franceso Yateso atminties teatro teorija, išskiriama atsiminimų teatralizacijos strategijos: atminties rūmų konceptas kuriamas pakartojant šventos vietos, evangelinio siužeto įvykius ar personažo charakterius ir išsaugant juos kaip atminties metaforas. Lyginant XVII a. jėzuitų spektaklį *Dievo ir žmonių padangtė* su šiuolaikiniais pastatymais Lietuvos sovietiniame ir posovietiniame, profesionaliame ir mėgėjų teatre, atskleidžiamos sielos skrydžio į Dievo namus metaforos.

Rekonstruojant, prisimenant, įsimenant ir pakartojant religiniame teatre Dievo surežisuotą *theatrum mundi* pasaulį kuriama metateatrinė reprezentacija, kurioje dominuoja atminties apie žmogaus ir Dievo dialogą metaforos. Todėl pakartojimo ir prisiminimų strategijų Lietuvos religiniame teatre tikslas – atkurti žmogaus ir Dievo dialogą ir reprezentuoti jį kaip *atminties rūmus*, kuriuose kuriama krikščioniška tapatybė.

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